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ABSTRACT

The retrospective case history is a little-used, but very valuable tool in organizational theory research. It is particularly useful in illuminating variables in an organization's development which, in controlled experimentation, would require prohibitively long periods of time to materialize. Additionally, the technique is useful for generating a longitudinal understanding of the interaction of many factors within an organizational system over time. The case study approach also has three key methodological weaknesses: the blurring of memories and the incompleteness of records: the need to identify patterns among variables that are independent of unique historical circumstances: and the danger of coming to hasty ex post facto interpretations. However, compensatory tactics can be employed to minimize these weaknesses because the technique offers numerous ways to cross-check any emerging hypothesis and to pursue the further implications of any theoretical assertion. The case history approach was employed in a research project at a Southern California community college to study the development of formalized staff positions responsible for institutional research during the college's 25-year history. Personal interviews and an examination of college records revealed numerous administrative, political, and budgetary factors associated with the creation, maintenance, and alteration of these positions. (Author/JP)

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USING THE RETROSPECTIVE CASE HISTORY IN EXPLORATORY ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH: RESEARCH AND PLANNING UNIT DEVELOPMENT IN A CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT

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USING THE RETROSPECTIVE CASE HISTORY IN EXPLORATORY ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH:
Research-and-Planning Unit Development in a California Community College District

Organizational research poses special problems for the investigator trained in conventional hypothesis-testing methods and paradigms. For one thing, the subject of study--the "organization"--is a remarkably complex social organism. Theorists have yet to chart its anatomy or even its basic "psychological" features with anything approaching the sophistication applied to the study of human beings. The great diversity among organizations overwhelms generalization. Many organizations are large, slow to develop and slow to respond, and it is frequently a matter of many years for a given dynamic pattern to unfold. Furthermore, organizational phenomena are highly interactive: one popular tradition in social science treats the organization as the "joint result" of environmental constraints, coordinative needs, and the discretionary activity of organizational members (Thompson, 1967).

The state-of-the-art in organization theory and research makes certain methods and research goals more appropriate than others. This paper operates from the premise that for many, if not most, research questions about organizations, the basic task remains an <u>exploratory</u> one. We are still at the stage of generating and refining useful theory, rather than testing it. This state of affairs seems especially true of the study of schools, colleges, hospitals and other public sector organizations, in that the bulk of organization theory to date has been developed with production firms in the private sector as primary focus.

To conducte productive exploratory studies, the organizational researcher needs to develop appropriate tools. The case study has for a long time been used as a standard tool to this end. This paper seeks to discuss a little-used variant of case study research--the retrospective case history--and to argue its special usefulness for illuminating many aspects of organizational functioning. The argument proceeds first with a discussion of the case for retrospective studies, along with an examination of the methodological issues raised by the technique. Then an example of the retrospective case

account is presented as an illustration. The paper closes with an assessment of the technique's strengths and weaknesses as encountered in the example.

THE RETROSPECTIVE CASE HISTORY IN EXPLORATORY ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

The usefulness of case studies for exploratory purposes are as well documented as are its weaknesses as a confirmatory tool. By immersing oneself in the details of a specific case, the analyst can begin to construct variables which bear some meaning in the "real world" of those who live and work within the organization's boundaries. The researcher can also pinpoint mechanisms by which one feature of organizational functioning is linked to another. Out of this immersion come numerous hypotheses about the way the parts of the organizational system interrelate.

But as already mentioned, organizations are often large and slow to develop; immersion in the present complexity of an ongoing organization may obscure the forest for the trees, particularly with respect to the longer term developmental forces at work in this situation. To hang around and wait for things to change is usually prohibitively expensive and unproductive. A careful reconstruction of organizational history within the reach of memories and existing records can frequently provide a reasonable alternative.

There are reasons, beyond those of simple feasibility, for conducting organizational research in this way. Much of organization theory to date has been constructed as a static interelation of parts within a systemic whole. Correspondingly, the research base for such theoretical work has involved large-sample cross-sectional studies or one-shot case studies with limited time perspective. The consequence of this emphasis has been a widespread inattention to questions of organizational dynamics and models of change over time, a situation which has led to recent calls from some quarters for more longitudinal and more historical work in the study of organizations (e.g., Meyer, 1978: 8-9).

Feasible as the retrospective case may be, and desireable as it may be for dynamic questions about organizations, an old complaint about the single case may still be raised: What can be learned from the study of a single case which furthers general knowledge about organizations?

The answer presumes that there are at least two kinds of "generalization" of interest to social scientists. One is "descriptive" or "statistical" generalization: the assertion that observations of a sample of cases apply, within specified limits of probability, to a population from which the sample is drawn. The other has been called "theoretical generalization": the formulation of relationships between variables at higher levels of abstraction (Rosenberg, 1968: 222-223). Undeniably, there are limits to the capacity of a single case to generate knowledge embracing the full range of possibility in a population of organizations or in a given conceptual space. But still there are important contributions which the single case study can make to generalizations of either kind.

First, beyond its clear capacity to describe an instance of a phenomenon, any case study offers the potential to conduct rough "tests" of emerging hypotheses. Wherever there is variation <u>within</u> the system represented by the case, this can be used to suggest, and in some cases to assess, the relationship of those factors which vary to a given dependent variable of interest (Lipset, Trow, and Coleman, 1956: Appendix I). Furthermore, the case study provides a unique opportunity to check out the multiple implications of a given theoretical notion, thus lending stronger support (or refutation) to an emerging theoretical structure. This process can be thought of as generalizing to a "conceptual population, a population of the multiple implications of one specific theory " (Campbell, 1979:59).

Second, by embracing a sufficiently long time frame, a retrospective case study provides the possibility for numerous comparisons across time within the single case. In the tradition of time series research, the case at earlier points in time acts as its own "control". Even though observations of the same case at different time points are inevitably correlated with one another, with a sufficient gap of time, turnover of actors, and alteration of structural arrangements, one may still make provocative comparisons between organization arrays which are to some extent "independent" of one another. In other words, a long time frame retrospective study may approximate a multiple-case research design. If the choice of these "cases" brackets a range of variation found in a larger population, inferences can be drawn to a larger population, though in a somewhat different way from statistical inferences (Kennedy, 1979:666-671).

To summarize, any case study offers the researcher the chance to understand and conceptualize variables as they are perceived to operate in a specific setting, to trace mechanisms by which variables are linked, and to generate numerous hypotheses about the phenomenon of interest. Not only that, the researcher may conduct a rough "test" of emerging hypotheses to the extent that the system being studied contains variations related to the hypothesis and permits theoretical implications to be pursued and cross-checked. The retrospective study adds to these capacities the perspective of time, enabling the researcher to study feasibly slow developmental phenomena and to conduct comparisons across time, in an approximation of multiple-case research designs.

Methodological Issues in Retrospective Case Research

For all its obvious advantages to the study of organizations, retrospective case research raises particular methodological issues deserving careful attention. The most difficult of these--and one of the most central challenges to oral history of any kind--is that the past is harder to "see" than the present. Memories blur, or are distorted by the present needs or frame of reference of the informant (Thompson, 1972). Oral history furthermore comes from an interactive process, and reflects to some degree the interpersonal chemistry of researcher and informant (Grele, 1975). Records are selectively deposited in the first place, and are often incomplete when unearthed at a later time for study (Webb, et al., 1966:54). As a result of these factors, any careful reconstruction of the past leads to conflicting and incomplete accounts of what took place, what was associated with what, and so on.

To a certain extent this situation can be compensated for by a judicious use of multiple information sources brought to bear on the same event. Eye-witness accounts can be cross-checked against records or other eye-witnesses until a composite "courtroom truth" emerges. By collecting informants accounts under optimal conditions in the first place (i.e., in non-threatening circumstances, with adequate assurance of confidentiality,

where the informant no longer has an active stake in the situation being described) their testimonies are more or less believeable. Confining investigations to "near history" within the past decade or two also helps by maximizing the number of available informants, the accuracy of recall, and the richness of records.[4] Multiple indicators from archival sources, less reactive than informant data, can be used to converge on useful approximations of an historical reality. A skillful interweaving of these two kinds of data sources can go a long way towards developing plausible retrospective accounts.

Such techniques are relevant only to issues of fact; one may also be interested in the diverse perceptions of reality held by different participants in a given organization. Depending on basic worldview, organizational role, or vantage point, individual participants construct--or reconstruct--different pictures of the world around them. To a very real extent, there is more than one truth about a given organizational phenomenon, and the retrospective case account developed from multiple informants can help to capture that diversity.

A second issue parallels the first: the increasing distance in time is accompanied for most research questions by a loss of the fine detail of interaction between individuals or the subtler aspects of events. What remains are salient events, vivid and climactic moments, in short, the most prominent features of the organizational landscape. This is simply a built-in limitation of such retrospective research. It is most suitable for questions concerning the larger and more visible aspects of the organization, those which will be likely to remain in view to informant and researcher after some years' distance in time.

A third issue relates to the interaction between an organization and its specific historical context. In the language of experimental research, the apparent relationship between "independent" and "dependent" variables are confounded by "history" (Campbell and Stanley, 1966:5). The problem is more one of methodological paradigm and research purposes than a weakness of the

retrospective case technique per se. Its purpose is explicitly to tell the story over time, of "interdependent" variables within an organizational system as it is embedded in its evolving historical context. The association of historical factors and organizational events is part of the picture the researcher wishes to paint. However, one significant problem does exist: comparisons across time are not only comparisons of an organizational phenomonon at two time points, but also a comparison between the two entire configurations of historical circumstances surrounding the organization. The researcher must thus interpret such comparisons accordingly, by including the most relevant historical context shifts in patters of organizational change.

A fourth issue, the strongest objection to conducting this kind of research, comes from those who belong to a tradition of controlled experiment and espouse its associated notions of causal explanation. After all, anything can be explained after the fact, and how can the explanations ever meet the test of nullifiability? But even strong exponents of such views have considerable room for properly interpreted ex post facto research:

> "...It can even be said that ex post facto research is more important than experimental research...most important social scientific and educational research questions do not lend themselves to experimentation, although many of them do lend themselves to controlled inquiry of the ex post facto kind... e.g., a study of boards of education and superintendents..." (Kerlinger, 1973:392).

This position is nonetheless qualified with numerous--and justifiable--cautions about interpretation of ex post facto associations, as well as a general exhortation to include in any good ex post facto study the testing of alternative hypotheses, for and against the researcher's major hypotheses.

This paper takes a more "organic" and inductive view of the ex post facto research process, especially as applied to the problem of exploratory organizational research. In the manner of "grounded theory" research, explanatory propositions (hypotheses, in a sense) are induced from specific instances of a given association between factors, as amended and elaborated

by counter-instances to the pattern (paralleling the argument of Glaser and Strauss, 1967:Chapter 5). Prior theory may play a role in this process, but the emphasis shifts from the testing of ideas, to one of generating them, without sacrifice of rigor. The continual search of data sources for evidence to disconfirm emerging propositions--and the amendment of propositions to take account of disconfirmations--is the primary safeguard against sloppy and superficial interpretation. The multiplicity of data sources in case study research makes this kind of cross-checking and elaboration especially powerful. Finally, the time perspective of the the retrospective study makes it possible to do a more thorough job of searching for counter-instances and disconfirming evidence.

AN EXAMPLE OF A RETROSPECTIVE CASE ACCOUNT FOR EXPLORATORY PURPOSES

A study, now in progress, of the development of institutional research and planning units in community colleges and college districts provides an example of the use of such a retrospective case account (Knapp, 1980). The overall objective of the study was to develop a set of propositions concerning the creation, maintenance, and alteration of formalized staff positions responsible for institutional research or planning in community colleges and college districts.

The study took as its starting point a broad category of organizational structures--all those taking primary responsiblity for the gathering and analysis of data about institutional functioning, and visibly designated with such responsiblity. The resulting category of "Research-Evaluation-Planning" units (hereafter termed REP's in this paper) included, for example, multi-staff planning units at district administrative offices, staff assistants for research reporting to college presidents, and faculty members released half-time to function as institutional research officers. One thrust of the study was simply to capture the diversity of structual forms which a formalized research-planning function might take in a community college district.

But beyond that, the study sought to address three questions concerning the development over time of REP's in community college districts: (1) what factors were most strongly associated with the creation of REP's in the first place? (2) What factors were most directly related to the maintenance of REP's once created? (3) Under the influence of pressure from their surrounding organizational environments, how did REP's adapt in order to maintain their often fragile niche within their host organizations?

Previous work in organization theory, supplemented by the small amount of work in research literature of higher education provided a framework of ideas to guide the study, but one which fell far short of providing an integrated set of testable hypotheses. For example, the organizational theories pointed to organizational size and complexity or the political dynamics surrounding top leadership as important stimulants to REP creation. Other work underscored the potential differences between those conditions supporting REP creation, and those associated with REP maintenance. The existing research base, almost entirely derived from static cross-sectional surveys, contributed aggregate-level descriptive information: REP's were almost always small, marginal and relatively unstable. Other organizational theories pointed to the special pressures to which REP's would predictably be subjected; staff-line friction, worker-management antagonism, and the special resistances of professional staff (i.e., faculty) to institutional data bases. The capacity of the REP to "develop maintenance strategies" in its own behalf was also suggested by several organizational theories. Finally, theory suggested differing effects of organizational growth and decline conditions on REP development.[1]

Few theories or studies addressed the REP phenomenon directly. The phenomenon has not recieved much concentrated research attention as yet, despite the increasing importance of the research-planning function and the organizational structures (such as the REP) developed to carry it out. Nor was it even clear from the existing literature what reasonably constituted

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[1]For a more extended treatment of these theoretical ideas and the corresponding research base, see a companion paper "Processes by which Research-Evaluation-Planning Units Develop in Educational Organizations: Building a Model from the Literature on Formal Organization's and Exploratory Case Research," available upon request from the author.

an "REP". This conceptual ambiguity, and the absence of an extensive research base, were the primary rationale for doing an exploratory study. And because the focus of attention was on the development of structural features within the organization, an extended time frame seemed most productive.

Guided by this framework of ideas, a retrospective case history was constructed of REP development in a western community college district over the past 25 years. The community college was chosen for the study because it provided a particularly good "natural laboratory" for investigating REP development processes. A district was ultimately selected in which (a) numerous efforts at REP development had taken place; (b) extensive documentation and the relevant informants were available; (c) there were marked variations in organizational complexity, including a period as a single-college district and a comparable period with multiple colleges; (d) distinct periods of organizational growth and decline could be identified.

The case study was constructed in the following manner. Access to the community college district was secured, in part through the researcher's familiarity with it, having worked there for a year prior to conducting the study. Preliminary interviews were done with existing administrators and research personnel to develop a list of the most likely key informants and to sketch out the most salient events in the district's history relevant to REP development. Then, through review of records (Board minutes for the past 25 years) a timeline of salient REP events was constructed, including times of creation and elimination of positions, entrances and exits of personnel, and relevant events in district history. Then a set of key informants was located: at least two for any particular episode in the twenty-five year history, including the staff member in charge of research or planning (if such a person existed) and the college or district chief administrator. Fourteen individuals--all the research planning heads and all but one of the relevant chief administrators in the twenty-five year history--were interviewed in depth as key informants (see Appendix A for interview schedule). In most cases these people no longer had any association with the district and spoke about their experiences with considerable detachment.

The accounts of the informants were then combined with further documentary evidence (research reports, memos, etc.) into a descriptive narrative, which was read by the informants for inaccuracies. A panel of a dozen "third-party" observers, people with a long working history in the college district and intimate aquaintance with events described in the narrative, also read and commented on the narrative. The narrative was amended to accommodate divergent views and to further eliminate inaccuracies. This final version of the "story of REP development" was then written up in a way that helped refine the ideas from previous theory and research.

The case study resulted in a set of patterns concerning the processes of REP creation, maintenance, and elimination in the community college district. These patterns represent the end product of an inductive "grounded theory" process, by which repeated associations of certain factors with REP events were formulated as "narrative propositions" and then amended to accommodate counter-instances of the pattern. Considerable rigor was thus built into the case analysis process, through constant attention to non-supportive evidence.

The variety of data sources made it possible to assess the quality of information. Memories over the more than two decades embraced by the study were remarkably good, as assessed by a check of recalled events against Board records. Different informants told very similar versions of the story (with a few noticeable exceptions) due perhaps to the highly visible nature of the events being described.

The remainder of the paper presents a condensed version of the patterns emerging from the case, both to illustrate the nature of the research process and its results. In closing the major methodological contributions and limitations of the technique will be examined, as they occurred in the construction of this case.

REP Development in the Santa Maria Community College District

A brief summary of case chronology will help to put the ensuing discussions in context. The history of REP development within the Santa

Maria Community College District starts in the mid-fifties at a time when the district comprised a single community college scattered across several sites with relatively small enrollment (headcount of 1800 students in 1956).[2] A community outcry for better management brought in a new dynamic superintendant in 1956, Joseph Bristol, who promptly set about resolving the problems of inadequate facilities, cementing community relations and bolstering programs and morale within the college. With considerable community involvement, he set in motion a "master planning" effort, which led to the building of a new consolidated campus opened in 1962. Rapidly expanding enrollments, along with strong community support and the annexation of adjoining school districts, prompted planning for two more campuses. The final years of Bristol's regime in the latter half of the 1960's were marked by hot debate over the degree of autonomy to be granted to the new campuses, a controversy resolved (contrary to the Superintendant's wishes) with the granting of considerable autonomy to the new colleges. Bristol left as the second college opened in 1968, followed soon by the third college in 1969.

During his 12 years as superintendant, four individuals worked under Bristol as expert "institutional research" and "planning" staff. These people had close and direct reporting relationships with the superintendant, and were responsible for a wide-range of staff assignments in addition to those related to REP functions, which spanned a range from master planning and accreditation self-study to program evaluation and the amassing of basic administrative information.

Against a backdrop of considerable campus unrest, the structure of the new multi-college district was forged in the years 1968 to 1972, under a new superintendant Charles Rogers. A separate district administrative office came into being with a small staff. Enrollment continued to grow, then reached a plateau in 1970 (headcount 27,000) and dipped slightly in

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[2] All personal and place names in this account have been changed.

the following year. Administrators at all levels were enmeshed in controversies. For almost the first time in many years the district faced considerable financial problems paying for the completion of the new campuses, compounded by the enrollment drop which put a further pinch on resources. Great efforts and several special elections were required to persuade county voters to support the necessary tax and bond measures.

There were no designated research or planning personnel at district-level during these years. At two of the colleges, however, administrative staff with limited "research" assignments occupied positions for brief periods of time.

Coming to the district with a mandate for sounder management, a new superintendant named Gilbert Shaw commenced in 1973 a year-long "master planning" effort aimed at establishing a comprehensive district-wide arrangement of educational programs, organization, and support services, by contrast with Bristol's master planning for facilities 17 years earlier. Following the master planning process (though conceived concurrently), a heavily-staffed "Planning & Development Unit" was created in the SMCCD District Office. Over the next several years the unit engaged aggressively in a wide variety of activities, including facilities planning and maintenance, MIS development and data processing center supervision, educational program coordination and review, external reporting, and grants development, as well as staff assignments for the superintendant. During this period no formalized research or planning positions existed at the 3 colleges (or were allowed to), though one college arranged an informal position.

The District grew slightly during the years from 1973 to 1978, at the same time stabilizing financially and politically, until the unanticipated passage of a statewide property tax limitation initiative in 1987. Though having potentially disastrous financial impact on district operations, the net result of this measure in the short run amounted to a small reduction in district revenues. Overall programmatic and administrative structure remained essentially intact, but with small reductions in many departments (including the P&D unit) amid considerable maneuvering and speculation about further program reductions. The more extended impact of the tax limitation measure remains a central preoccupation for SMCCD at present writing, with unknown future implications.

Conceptualizing the Object of Study: the REP

By comparing the different research and planning positions in the case history it was possible to focus and operationalize the concept of "REP". Research-and-planning positions in SMCCD were on the whole short-term, expendable additions to the administrative structure. Eight individuals held research or planning "head" positions at district-level and three more at the colleges, at various times over the 25-year period, with an average tenure of less than 3 years. Organizationally, most of these "REP units" were one-person operations (the P&D unit, however, had a professional staff of six), with a close reporting relationship with college or district chief administrators. Most of these personnel possessed some specialized expertise relevant to their jobs; nearly half of the district-level REP personnel were brought in from outside the district, a rare practice for administrative appointments in the State's community college system. All but one of the research or planning personnel had titles signifying their expert roles.

The primary mission of these personnel varied considerably, but without exception their assignments were wide-ranging and left considerable room for discretion regarding exactly what was to be done. In total, no one REP staff person can be said to have performed the same job as another, though there were tasks common to all, such as enrollment projections and handling external informational requests. Still, all shared the defining characteristics of "REP" as set out in the beginning of the study: they occupied formally designated positions with broad institutional purview and had primary responsibility for providing systematic information and analysis to decision makers.

Four issues regarding the distinctness of the REP as a structural entity emerge from the case study, along with some useful clarifications.

(1) What constitutes "research", "evaluation", and "planning"? These labels were anything but precise, but with remarkable consistency, informants placed certain types of activities with heavy informational-handling components in these categories (e.g., program evaluation, master planning, accreditation self-study, various forms of statistical reporting...) and others not

(e.g., attendance accounting, student testing, data processing management, financial accounting...). The primary distinguishing criterion appeared to be the degree of routineness in the task.[3] A few activities remained ambiguous and could only be classified arbitrarily (grants development, staff development, budgeting...). Activities with little information-handling were consistently treated as non-REP functions (e.g., facilities maintenance, educational program supervision, and other forms of "line" administration).

(2) Given that positions involved a mixture of assignments, what proportion of "research", "evaluation", or "planning" duties was viewed as an "REP position"? While recognizing that many administrative positions involved some research, evaluation, or planning responsibilities, informants were quick to point to a proportion of REP duties of a third or more as a "substantial" proportion of time to research or planning. This proportion represents a point at which personnel began to be identified as "the research person". Informants noted and agreed that several of the designated REP personnel were "only marginally concerned with research" or "researcher in name only"--this constitutes almost a distinct type of REP, perhaps created and maintained for more symbolic reasons.

(3) How can REP as "formal structure" be distinguished from REP "behavior"? Given the ambiguities in the definition of REP functions and the mixture of assignments attached to each position, the REP was a structure in considerable flux, defined in a sense by people's behavior. But an imprint of that process was made periodically (yearly, in effect), as organization charts were drawn, budgets allocated, and duties

[3] "Planning" posed a special problem for classification, in that many administrators were thought to have considerable planning responsibilities. As a staff function, "planning" usually meant assembling a systematic database, goal statements, and the programmatic alternatives for other decision makers.

distributed. Personnel assuming substantial research responsibilities, and so titled, were treated as having a somewhat special—and sometimes problematic--identity.

(4) What constitutes the beginning and ending points of a given REP? Although in formal terms REP positions persisted twice through periods of unfilled vacancy, informants treated these times as if the REP no longer existed--which was in effect the case: in each instance REP personnel were promoted to more generalized administrative positions and took some of their REP functions along with them. Position termination, as creation, happened more formally, with documentation and action by the Board of Trustees.

On the basis of these considerations, which were heavily influenced by the informants' shared perceptions of what was and wasn't an REP, the case chronology was blocked out as diagrammed in Figure 1.

Interpreting the Case History: REP Creation, Maintenance, and Elimination

A number of salient patterns were detected in the case history. The analysis summarized here focuses on the simplest of dependent variables, the presence or absence of the REP in any given year. Within the lirits of this paper, the most prominent patterns of REP creation, maintenance, and elimination will be described without the full array of supporting evidence, as the focus of the paper remains the illustration of the retrospective case technique.

Creation Patterns. Where top leadership had gained by virtue of past training, experience, or basic philosophy a strong commitment to the idea of the REP, the position or subunit was more likely to be created. In other words, for the organization to "catch the contagion" of the REP, the chief administrator must be susceptible! At the same time, the case made it clear that powerful constraints could override the CA's strong commitment, as evidenced by the district-level prohibition on REP creation at college-level during the years 1973 to 1979.

Figure 1

I. SINGLE-COLLEGE PHASE: 1956 - 1968

SMCCD(College 1)

1956-60: REP1 - "Director of Research"

1960-62: (position eliminated)

1962-65: REP2 - "Director, Planning & Research"

1965-66: (position vacant)

1966-68 REP3 - "Head, Research Office"

II. MULTI-COLLEGE PHASE: 1968 - 1979

	District Office	College 1	College 2	College 3
1968-69:	--	(position vacant)	--	--
1969-71	--	REP6[a] - "Assistant to President for Research"	--	--
1971-73	--	(position eliminated)	--	REP7[a] - "Director of Admissions, Records, & Research"
1973-74:	REP4[a]:- "Asst. to Supt. for Research, Development & Spec. Projects"	--	--	--
1975-78	REP5:- "Planning & Development Office"(title in 78-79 - "Educ. Svcs. Unit")	--	REP8[a] - untitled faculty member on released time	--

a - marginal or symbolic REP

A strong relationship appeared in the data between REP creation and increasing organizational size and complexity. Size alone, however, seemed less directly associated in that REP's occurred at various points along the growth trajectory from small to large institution; an REP was conspicuously absent during one of the periods of most rapid size increase during the early 1960's. The basic mechanism appeared to be this: size increases stimulated planning for organizational expansion (the creation of the first two REP's was clearly associated with this facilities expansion process); ultimately, expansion led to a multi-unit college district of considerably greater complexity, which posed a management burden on district top leadership (the last two district REP's were created in part to cope with this management burden). In either period, there was clearly pressure on top leadership to rationalize the interrelationship of a larger number of diverse organizational elements.

Turbulent conditions in SMCCD's local environment were twice associated with REP creation, but once with non-creation. A more complex pattern appeared to apply here: local outcry against the management practices of the college district were in 1956 and 1974 followed by REP creation, either as a symbolic or pragmatic effort at reform, or both. External pressure reflecting environmental trends less related to management practices, such as the campus (and societal) unrest of the 1969-1971 period, was not followed by REP creation. A second pattern linked pressure from the legitimating professional community with REP creation: anticipation of accreditation visits and associated requirements was three times associated with REP creation during the SMCCD single-college phase. Later, as a multi-college district, SMCCCD was no longer subject to this pressure at district level, and the timing of district REP creation bore little relationship to that of accreditation.[4]

[4]The accrediting agency accredits individual colleges, not the district as a whole. In SMCCD, meeting accreditation requirements remained a college-level function.

REP creation seemed to happen at times when the district chief administrator was politically most vulnerable and wished to solidify more centralized political authority. Newness in office and origin from outside the district--both suggesting the lack of a developed and loyal constituency within the organization--seemed especially linked to REP creation.[5] Also, REP's were created under CA's who sought to exercise more centralized decision-making authority and were permitted by the prevailing climate of opinion to do so. Collectively, chief administrators noted five different ways in which they had hoped REP's would help them politically: (1) providing a close ally; (2) assembling information with which to "sell" policies or decisions; (3) gathering "intelligence" about various parts of the organization; (4) setting issues in terms that were "above politics"; (5) buying time until appropriate opportunities for action.

Maintenance Patterns. Considerable evidence emerged from the case account for a short-term inertial effect of creation conditions on the continuation of the REP, once it was created. Though formally renegotiated each year, all REP's lasted more than one year, due apparently to a combination of factors: the time requirements of primary REP tasks (e.g., new campus planning, MIS development), ongoing commitment of the chief administrator to the REP, continuing thrust toward centralized authority, or continuing conditions of organizational complexity.

Once created, REP personnel (and their sponsors) did engage in active efforts to build a more secure niche for the unit. Two types of niche-building seemed most prominent: first, links were developed between REP's and services viewed as "essential" (revenue production or provision of "basic" administrative support such as the supervision of facilities maintenance or data processing services). Two essential functions were never linked to the REP: business services and instructional

[5] The second superintendant, a new outsider in 1969, did not create an REP. He apparently tried, but was not strongly committed to the idea or to centralization.

administration. A second type of niche-building was more political: association of the REP with power-holders, especially the chief administrator. Case study evidence suggested that both types of niche-building resulted from the joint efforts of REP personnel and others in the organization, principally the chief administrator; there was little evidence of active entrepreneurial behavior on the part of REP staff, except of a subtle kind hard to detect in this kind of case study.

The overall intermittent pattern of REP's over the 25-year period was strong testimony to REP instability. Both forms of niche-building seemed associated with early termination of the REP, through total devotion of REP personnel to essential functions and corresponding neglect of REP functions, or through the leaving of powerful sponsors--in either event, REP staff had a tendency to be promoted to established administrative positions without replacement.

There was evidence of the REP taking--or being assigned--informational tasks closely related to pressing contingencies. The effect of these activities on REP maintenance was hard to assess, as most REP's were maintained for approximately equivalent periods of time and the nature of contingencies differed from REP to REP. Nonetheless, across different REP's, the handling of pressing informational demands from outside groups (especially the Board of Trustees and the accreditation agency), the assessment of sources of students and votes in the local community, and the assessment of controversial internal programs represented three persistent themes in the REP's efforts to cope with pressing problems. Clearly, the REP's ability to demonstrate "unique competence" in handling these problems varied. Also, during the one retrenchment period in which a district-level REP existed (1978-79), there is some provocative evidence of active efforts by REP personnel to provide an informational basis for cutback decision-making, but the effect of these efforts on REP maintenance is hard to determine within the constraints of time and detail imposed by the study.

Elimination Patterns. Conceptually a part of maintenance processes, several distinct patterns of "non-maintenance" (elimination) or substantial reduction in the REP emerge from the case study and deserve special mention. First, the two periods of retrenchment during which overall institutional resource levels dropped, corresponded in the first instance to the elimination of a college-level REP and in the second instance to a substantial reduction in the heavily-staffed district-level REP. There was some evidence during the second retrenchment period of two counterforces, perhaps related to the maintenance of the reduced REP; first, an increased demand for REP services as top leadership grappled with the politically and substantively difficult process of making cutback decisions, and second, an increased tendency toward centralized authority in response to the threatening environment.

A high degree of mobility on the part of personnel occupying REP positions and the dynamic nature of their career development processes also seemed to contribute with consistency to the termination of REP's. Almost half of the REP heads reported making career change decisions within a year or two of taking on their REP assignment, which sent them seeking more established organizational roles soon afterwards--several on to higher administrative positions, others to teaching. All but one had never occupied an REP role before doing so in SMCCD.

Internal resistance to the REP appeared to contribute an additional impetus to the unit's elimination or reduction. Informants reported the most pointed resistance as emanating from the faculty during the single-college phase, and from college-level administrators during the multi-college phase, each group apparently feeling that REP activities infringed on areas over which they had formerly exercised autonomous control. The two REP heads who left their positions "under fire" seemed particularly vulnerable to resistance due to their coming from outside the district and their distant or ineffective relationship with key faculty groups. Also, it appeared that an aggressive or advocacy stance by REP personnel seemed to provoke resistance, perhaps because this implied a departure from the neutrality implied by the "REP" designation.

A METHODOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CASE EXAMPLE

Looking back over this example one must from the start take note of the fit between the retrospective case technique and the research problem. The study was part of an investigation of a dynamic phenomenon--the development of a particular kind of structural feature over time. Because the REP was a fairly marginal organizational element, a twenty-five year timeframe gave plenty of room for change: at least eight different REP's were tried within the SMCCD District during that space of time. The high degree of REP development activity was admittedly not typical of community colleges within this state, but more importantly the case did include at different times in its history, a number of the elements of different community college districts. In this sense, the SMCCD was representative of many different community college districts at different points in its history: single-college and multi-college districts, decentralized and centralized administrative structures, small and large colleges, expanding and contracting resource base, and so on. This fact, combined with the many instances of REP's, permitted many provocative comparisons to be made within the SMCCD.

In addition, the problem tackled was one which had not been extensively or carefully conceptualized prior to doing the study. Previous work in organization research had not been sufficiently focused to yield useful predictions about REP's; previous empirical studies of institutional research offices had lacked a developmental perspective, and had tended to set unduly restrictive boundaries around what was or wasn't to be considered an "institutional research office". So the first contribution of the case account was to suggest a more careful definition of "REP".

A second contribution of the case account was its ability to specify more carefully the linking mechanisms between organizational conditions and REP events. For example, as summarized under Creation Patterns increased organizational size alone was not so closely linked to REP creation as was increased "administrative complexity", whether present or anticipated. The REP's creation seemed especially linked to top leadership needs to rationalize the resulting increases in complexity. The case study thus helped to pinpoint specific aspects of the expansion process which stimulated REP development.

A third contribution of the case account was its capacity to aid the researcher to converge on general research patterns from disparate pieces of data. For example, the link between REP creation and "top leadership political vulnerability" emerged out of repeated associations between CA turnovers and REP creation, the observation by one CA about the need for political allies at the start of his regime, the elaborate fanfare attending the twice-repeated master planning processes, the apparently diminished importance of the REP's several years into the CA's regimes, to mention several factors. All suggested a relationship between factors at a higher level of abstraction, one involving the CA's political needs and the role of a formalized institutional data function. Descriptive generalizations derived from repeated associations across the "population" of REP heads also emerged from the case account. The consistent relationship between REP creation and CA's who were <u>outsiders</u> to SMCCD is an example of such a generalization, one which gained further support from the fact that CA's who were insiders did not create REP's.

A fourth contribution of the case account was its broad scope, its capacity to attend to a wide range of potentially important influences acting simultaneously on the REP development dynamics. At least a dozen different kinds of factors emerged as bearing on REP creation, maintenance, or elimination. The case account made it possible to consider the simultaneous operation of all these forces, at least to the extent that their operation could be detected retrospectively. (No doubt other more subtle factors were at work as well, which escaped the notice of the researcher). Admittedly, the fact that many factors operated simultaneously in one case did not make it easy to <u>isolate</u> one factor from another except as comparisons within the system over time highlighted specific contrasts.

The limitations of the retrospective case technique are also well illustrated by the SMCCD account. First, the range of generalization was circumscribed in several respects. Some comparisons between parts of the system at one point in time were simply not possible to make, such as that between college and district-office during the multi-college phase where the presence of the REP at one level precluded its presence

at the other. Also, comparisons across time, between differing REP arrangements, involved entities which were not wholly independent of one another. Three REP's for example, occurred at different times under the first superintendant. Though one can learn about REP development dynamics by comparing the configuration of forces surrounding each, such an analysis tends to overlook the common thread: each was part of an evolution in the superintendant's thinking about what would constitute a useful REP. The instances were not <u>independent</u> alignments of organizational conditions and REP events. However, with comparisons made across greater distances in time--which meant also across different regimes--the arrays of factors were more independent, and hence permitted a better approximation of a multi-case comparative research design, though still with the basic confounding of historical circumstances.

Any inferences from the SMCCD case to an imagined or real population of community college districts must take into account the special characteristics of the SMCCD which made it unlike other community college districts. It represented a predominantly high wealth, urban and suburban county in a fast-growing metropolitan area. Throughout the twenty-five year timeframe embraced by the study, the district was held in high esteem within the state's community colleges and thought of as a pacesetter. The possible links between such factors as community wealth level or organizational prestige level and REP development were thus impossible to explore because they were invariant within this case history. By contrast, other organizational dimensions such as size varied tremendously across time; consequently the links between such factors and REP events could be explored.

Third, there was definite evidence of the "blur of memory" over greater distances in time, particularly with respect to the recollections of the first superintendant. Fortunately, for periods of time such as the 1955-1962 period, the recall of the superintendant's REP head was very strong, as assessed by the fit between his testimony and Board minutes. In this instance, the gaps in the superintendant's accounts could be filled. For the latter half of his regime from 1962 until 1968, the gaps are more noticeable and more troublesome. A good deal of

uncertainty surrounds the "great autonomy debate" which took place during those years. To some extent this uncertainty can be taken as a reflection of the strong feelings, sharp antagonisms, and radically different perceptions of events held by different individuals. The episode has considerable relevance to the continued development of REP's in centralized positions, and parts of it must remain shrouded in ambiguity.

Finally, the historical backdrop to the REP development story in the Santa Maria District changed radically over the twenty-five year period, and it must remain part of any assertions about REP development processes. The strong liberalism and widespread resistance to central authority in the mid to late 60's, for example, must be seen as one key element in the lack of an REP in the new central district administrative office of 1968; conversely, the public conservatism and pressure for accountability of the mid 70's must be seen as a correspondingly important element in the configuration of forces leading to the elaborate district office REP started in 1975.

Where to go from here? The research process does not end with such a case account. Some kinds of associations between REP events and surrounding factors invite a more structured investigation with a larger number of cases. The case account provides a basis for constructing more conventional measures of concepts such as "political vulnerability" and "REP maintenance strategy", along with the general hypotheses linking such concepts together. But such a large sample study would have to restrict its focus to a few of the more important elements in the REP development process, and perhaps embrace a more restricted timeframe in order to create a proper "test" of the hypotheses emerging from this case history. However, even there the research process does not end. The case account points to the need for futher exploratory work, around more ambiguous concepts such as "symbolic REP": what does the REP symbolize to which groups? Does the symbol retain its potency over time, or is it a more short-term phenomenon, as with the political symbolism surrounding elective offices? What activities of REP personnel enhance or inhibit its image, or that of the power-holders with whom the REP is associated? These kind of questions invite further exploratory work,

perhaps of a less retrospective nature. Evidence from the retrospective account suggested the distinction between "symbolic" REP's and those created with more instrumental intent. But the further pursuit of the topic may require prospective case study to capture the critical features of this aspect of REP development before they evaporate into past time.

In summary, the retrospective case account can provide a powerful device for exploring the phenomena so often confronted by organizational researchers. At the very least, the technique offers a feasible route to longitudinal understanding of those things which take a long time to develop. As with any kind of case study, the researcher is able to attend more closely to the meanings of variables held by organizational participants. The technique is especially useful for generating the "big picture": the interaction of many factors within a case over time. Through comparisons within the organizational system over time, the case history can be used to approximate a multiple-case comparative research design, though the resulting comparisons are limited by the lack of independence between the different "cases" and the confounding effects of the evolving historical context. By offering numerous ways to cross-check any emerging hypotheses, as well as ways to pursue the further implications of any theoretical assertion, the case account offers the possibility for considerable rigor. The results lack the firm and final ring of the conclusions many social scientists are taught to search for. But for the task of making sense of the complexities of organizations and their development over time, the technique seems to show special promise.

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APPENDIX A

CASE STUDY KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Personal History of Informant	How long have you been at your present job?
	What were you doing during the period of time we are talking about? (Prompt with specific period of years.)
	When did you first start working at this institution? In what capacity?
	How long have you been working in the California community colleges? How long in some research and planning capacity?
	Have you worked for significant periods of time outside of education? In what field? Doing what?
	In what fields have you been trained? (Probe for training relevant to REP work--e.g., advanced graduate training in education, social or natural sciences...)
	(Where relevant to REP development story, probe entries and exits from jobs, e.g., why did you get into the job? What made you leave when you did? etc.)
2. Informant's definitions of "Research," "Planning," "Institutional research."	We're talking about a function and positions for which there have been no fixed definitions in the field...
	What is meant by "institutional research" at this institution? By "planning"? By "program evaluation"? By "research & development"?
	How much agreement was there during the time period we're talking about regarding these terms?...Is there now?
	Have your definitions of these functions changed since (the beginning of the time period)? How?
3. Verifying Time Line Data	(These questions are intended both to verify what I have gleaned from records and previous conversations, and to orient the conversation around a particular set of people at a particular period of time.)
	Have I got the names and titles of the people in charge of research or planning correct? Have I placed them at the appropriate times? (Refer to timeline sketch.)

4. Thickening the Description of Research-and-Planning function, and of organizational arrangements for it.	Describe all the tasks that research and planning people were responsible for during the time period. What else? Did any other people help them do these tasks on a regular basis, like consultants or others in the college? Who helped? What did they do? What did the research and planning people actually do, if different from what they were supposed to do? Who did the research and planning people report to? How much of a budget did they have? Hard money or soft, or some combination? How much were they able to set their own research agenda as opposed to responding to others' requests? From whom did the requests come? How much of the work of research and planning people would you characterize as "institutional research," or "institutional planning," or "program evaluation," following the definitions we discussed earlier? To what extent did research and planning people recommend changes in existing practices, as a result of their research? Did they make any recommendations at all? Give examples. In your review, did research and planning activities contribute to the functioning of the district/college during the time period? How? Give examples. (Similarly,... or inhibit the functioning...?)
5. Informant's Perception of REP Change Processes	I'm interested in your view of any changes during (the time period) in: first, the research or planning activities, and second, the organizational arrangements for getting these things done? To what extent did research or planning activities change or evolve during the time period? How?

	To what extent did arrangements for accomplishing research and planning change or evolve? How? (Probe for specifics: Personnel? job assignments? position restructuring or departmental restructuring? budgets? communication links or reporting channels? new or altered committee arrangements?...Doublecheck references to beginning and end of the time period: how did beginning and end differ?)
	When arrangements changed, how did this affect people's jobs?
	What forces--people, conditions, events--do you see as most influential in bringing about the changes (refer specifically to REP structural changes, if respondent doesn't). Probe: influences within the district/college? within the local community? within the State as a whole?)
6. Putting REP changes in Context of Other Organizational Changes (as viewed by informant)	Step back from research and planning for a moment.
	What were the most significant events taking place in the college/district during this time period? Who was involved? When did these take place? Did these occurrences have impact on the organization of the district/college?
	Were there significant events or trends taking place in the immediate community which had impact on the district/college? In the region or State? How were these influences felt?
7. Bringing the story up to date (where informant is in position to do so)	Since the time period in question, what changes in research and planning arrangements have been made that you know of? How did the changes come about?
	Specifically, did Jarvis-Gann have any effect at this district/college on research-and-planning arrangements? How?

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Finally, what developments in research and planning do you see for the future?

8. Verifying Other Interpretations

One last thing would be particularly helpful to me. In talking to other people like yourself, a number of interpretations of changes in research and planning arrangements have been offered. Could you comment on how you see the following factors influencing the creation or maintenance of research-planning units at your district/college?

--external reporting demands
--acquisition of advanced computer technology
--expansion of facilities or programs
--crisis of confidence within the college or local community
--shrinking resources, and the need to cut budgets
--pressure for accountability
--trends or practices at other districts/colleges

Are there any others you would add? or ones you would subtract from this list? What do you see as the most important factors? Why do you think so?
(Note: be careful about redundancy--this topic may have been covered earlier in interviews.)

This interview schedule has been phrased with a past time period in mind; questions read as if asked of an observer outside the REP, but can equally well be asked with "you" substituted for "the research and planning people."